Man Made

After five years as the destination for XY lifestyle programming, Spike TV is reaching beyond testosterone for programming ideas

By Ray Richmond

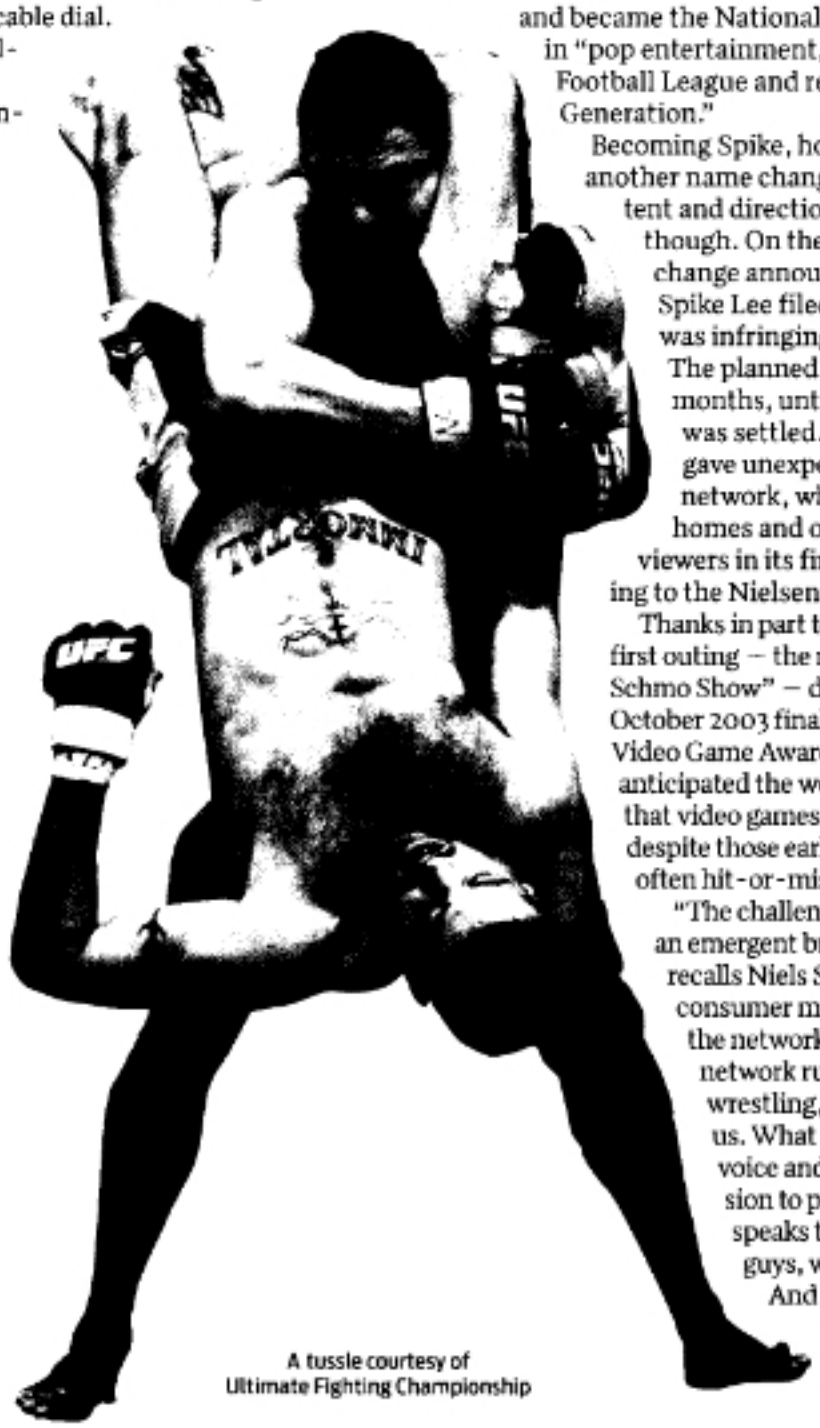
Women have Lifetime, Oxygen and WE. But until Spike TV launched on Aug. 11, 2003 — rebranded from the service formerly known as TNN — there was nothing singularly guy-centric on the cable dial.

Five years into its run as a testosterone trailblazer, identity is not the issue at Spike. In hitching its wagon to Ultimate Fighting Championship, "Star Wars" marathons, and no fewer than three awards programs — Guys' Choice Awards (established 2007), Scream Awards (established 2006) and Video Game Awards (established 2003), the network has fulfilled its mission to provide action-themed comfort food for its male viewership. But simultaneously, Spike is reaching for that next rung on the ladder, looking for the one original programming breakout hit to define it as more than just a network for guys.

"It's always a fight for respect, but the proof in where we are is our ability to target and attract marquee producers for our original shows," explains Sharon Levy, senior vp original series. "We pay competitive money for shows and have been building successful titles under the Spike banner, like our late-night show 'MANswers.' It's a show that asks questions guys want to know the answers to — like how to survive being hit by a car."

It takes at least one big crossover hit on a network to give a channel status — just think what "Mad Men" has done for AMC. "MANswers" probably won't do that for Spike, though the channel has been trying to build momentum in that direction with other shows like last year's John Leguizamo starrer "The Kill Point" and the announcement of a full slate of unscripted original pilots.

Big hit aside, Spike is still a youngster in the world of cable networks and has come far in just five years. Technically, the network has a 25-year history, starting out in 1983 as the Nashville Network (TNN), which was founded by WSM and Group W Satellite Communications.



A tussle courtesy of Ultimate Fighting Championship

Programming consisted of a mix of videos, NASCAR and the Grand Ole Opry, and the network survived until September 2000. By then the channel was a member of the Viacom/MTV Networks family and became the National Network, which specialized in "pop entertainment," including WWE, Arena Football League and reruns of "Star Trek: The Next Generation."

Becoming Spike, however, heralded not just another name change but a full overhaul of content and direction. It almost didn't happen, though. On the eve of the network's name change announcement in 2003, filmmaker Spike Lee filed a lawsuit, saying the channel was infringing on his name and reputation. The planned relaunch was delayed two months, until August, when the lawsuit was settled. But in launching the suit, Lee gave unexpected publicity to the fledgling network, which launched in 86 million homes and on average drew 1.2 million viewers in its first full calendar year, according to the Nielsen Co.

Thanks in part to the publicity windfall, Spike's first outing — the reality parody show "The Joe Schmo Show" — drew 3.4 million viewers for its October 2003 finale. Later that year came the first Video Game Awards, a program that presciently anticipated the worldwide industry phenomenon that video games would soon represent. But despite those early successes, the network was often hit-or-miss with programming.

"The challenge I came into was how to take an emergent brand and give it some real buzz," recalls Niels Schuurmans, Spike senior vp consumer marketing, who joined a year after the network's inception. "We had off-network runs of 'CSI,' we had WWE wrestling, and young guys already loved us. What we didn't have is a strong brand voice and personality. We made the decision to position Spike as a place that speaks to guys the way guys speak to guys, with honesty and no bullshit. And that ultimately led to going with action and identifying ourselves as being edgy and taking chances, but getting